A

# DISCOURSE, &c.

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A

# DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED TO THE

# STUDENTS

OF THE

# ROYAL ACADEMY,

ON THE

Distribution of the Prizes, *December* 11, 1769,

BY THE

# PRESIDENT.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

A

# DISCOURSE, &c.

*GENTLEMEN,*

I CONGRATULATE you on the honour which you have juſt received: I have the higheſt opinion of your merits, and could wiſh to ſhow my ſenſe of them in ſomething which poſſibly may be more uſeful to you than empty praiſe. I could wiſh to lead you into ſuch a courſe of ſtudy as may render your future progreſs anſwerable to your paſt improvement; and, whilſt I applaud you for what has been done, remind you of how much yet remains to attain perfection.

I flatter myſelf, that from the long experience I have had, and the unceaſing aſſiduity with which I have purſued thoſe ſtudies, in which, like you, I have been engaged, I ſhall be acquitted of vanity in offering ſome hints to your conſideration. They are indeed in a great degree founded upon my own miſtakes in the ſame purſuit; but the hiſtory of errors properly managed, often ſhortens the road to truth. And although no method of ſtudy that I can offer, will of itſelf conduct to excellence, yet it may preſerve induſtry from being miſapplied.

In ſpeaking to you of the Theory of the Art, I ſhall only conſider it as it has a relation to the method of your Studies.

Dividing the ſtudy of painting into three diſtinct periods, I ſhall addreſs you as having paſſed through the firſt of them, which is confined to the rudiments, including a facility of drawing any object that preſents itſelf, a tolerable readineſs in the management of colours, and an acquaintance with the moſt ſimple and obvious rules of compoſition.

This

This firſt degree of proficiency is in Painting what Grammar is in Literature, a general preparation to whatever ſpecies of the Art the Student may afterwards chuſe for his more particular application. The power of drawing, modelling, and uſing colours, is very properly called the Language of the Art; and in this language, the honours you have juſt received, prove you to have made no inconſiderable progreſs.

When the Artiſt is once enabled to expreſs himſelf with ſome degree of correctneſs, he muſt then endeavour to collect ſubjects for expreſſion; to amaſs a ſtock of Ideas, to be combined and varied as occaſion may require. He is now in the ſecond period of ſtudy, in which his buſineſs is to learn all that has been hitherto known and done. Having hitherto received inſtructions from a particular maſter, he is now to conſider the Art itſelf as his maſter; he muſt extend his capacity to more ſublime and general inſtructions; he muſt lift up his eyes to the Art itſelf, as it may be ſaid to live and to teach, in the works of the great Artiſts of paſt ages. Thoſe perfections which lye ſcattered among various maſters, are now united in one general idea, which is henceforth to regulate his taſte,

and enlarge his imagination. With a variety of models thus before him, he will avoid that narrowneſs and poverty of conception which attends a bigotted admiration of a ſingle maſter, and will ceaſe to follow any favourite where he ceaſes to excel. This period is, however, ſtill a time of ſubjection and diſcipline: though the Student will not reſign himſelf blindly to any ſingle authority when he may have the advantage of conſulting many, he muſt ſtill be afraid of truſting his own judgment, and of deviating into any track where he cannot find the footſteps of ſome former maſter.

The third and laſt period emancipates the Student from ſubjection to any authority, but what he ſhall himſelf judge to be ſupported by reaſon. Confiding now in his own judgment, he will conſider and ſeparate thoſe different principles to which different modes of beauty owe their original. In the former period he ſought only to know and combine excellence, wherever it was to be found, into one idea of perfection: in this, he learns what requires the moſt attentive ſurvey and the moſt ſubtle diſquiſition, to diſcriminate perfections that are incompatible with each other.

He

He is from this time to regard himſelf as holding the ſame rank with thoſe maſters whom he before obeyed as teachers; and as exerciſing ſovereignty over thoſe rules which have hitherto reſtrained him. Comparing now no longer the performances of Art with each other, but examining the Art itſelf by the ſtandard of Nature, he corrects what is erroneous, ſupplies what is ſcanty, and adds by his own obſervation what the induſtry of his predeceſſors has yet left wanting to perfection. Having well eſtabliſhed his judgment, and ſtored his memory, he may now without fear try the power of his imagination. The mind that has been thus diſciplined, may be indulged in the warmeſt enthuſiaſm, and venture to play on the borders of the wildeſt extravagance: the habitual dignity which long converſe with the greateſt minds has imparted to him, will diſplay itſelf in all his attempts; and he will ſtand among his inſtructors, not as an imitator, but as a rival.

Theſe are the different ſtages of the Art. But as I now addreſs myſelf particularly to thoſe Students who have been this day rewarded for their happy paſſage through the firſt period, I can with no propriety ſuppoſe they want any help

in the initiatory Studies. My preſent deſign is to direct your view to diſtant excellence, and to ſhow you the readieſt path that leads to it. Of this I ſhall ſpeak with ſuch latitude, as may leave the province of the profeſſor uninvaded; and ſhall not anticipate thoſe precepts, which it is his buſineſs to give, and your duty to underſtand.

It is indiſputably evident that a great part of every mans life muſt be employed in collecting materials for the exerciſe of Genius. Invention, ſtrictly ſpeaking, is little more than a new combination of thoſe images which have been previouſly gathered and depoſited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing: he who has laid up no materials, can produce no combinations.

A Student unacquainted with the attempts of former adventurers, is always apt to over-rate his own abilities; to miſtake the moſt trifling excurſions for diſcoveries of moment, and every well-known coaſt for a new-found country: if by chance he paſſes beyond his uſual limits, he congratulates his own arrival at thoſe regions which they who have ſteer'd a better courſe have long left behind them.

The productions of ſuch minds are ſeldom diſtinguiſhed by an air of originality: they are anticipated in their happieſt efforts; and if they are found to differ in any thing from their predeceſſors, it is only in irregular ſallies, and trifling conceits.

The more extenſive therefore your acquaintance is with the works of thoſe who have excelled, the more extenſive will be your powers of invention; and what may appear ſtill more like a paradox, the more original will be your conceptions. But the difficulty on this occaſion is to determine who ought to be propoſed as models of excellence, and who ought to be conſidered as the propereſt guides.

To a young man juſt arrived in *Italy*, many of the preſent painters of that country are ready enough to obtrude their precepts, and to offer their own performances as examples of that perfection which they pretend to recommend. The Modern, however, who recommends himſelf as a ſtandard, may juſtly be ſuſpected as ignorant of the true end, and unacquainted with the proper object of the art which he profeſſes. To follow ſuch a guide, will not only retard the Student, but miſlead him.

On whom then can he rely, or who ſhall ſhow him the path that leads to excellence? The anſwer is obvious: Thoſe great maſters who have travelled the ſame road with ſucceſs, are the moſt likely to conduct others. The works of thoſe who have ſtood the teſt of ages, have a claim to that reſpect and veneration to which no modern can pretend. The duration and ſtability of their fame, is ſufficient to evince that it has not been ſuſpended upon the ſlender thread of faſhion and caprice, but bound to the human heart by every tye of ſympathetic approbation.

There is no danger of ſtudying too much the works of thoſe great men; but how they may be ſtudied to advantage is an enquiry of great importance.

Some who have never raiſed their minds to the conſideration of the real dignity of the Art, and who rate the works of an Artiſt in proportion as they excel or are defective in the mechanical parts, look on Theory as an Art that may enable them to talk but not to paint better; and confining themſelves entirely to mechanical practice, very aſſiduouſly toil on in the drudgery of copying; and think they make a rapid progreſs while they faithfully exhibit the minuteſt part of a favourite picture. This appears to me a

very tedious, and I think a very erroneous method of proceeding. Of every large compoſition, even of thoſe which are moſt admired, a great part may be truly ſaid to be *common-place*. This, though it takes up much time in copying, conduces little to improvement. I conſider general copying as a deluſive kind of induſtry; the Student ſatisfies himſelf with the appearance of doing ſomething; he falls into the dangerous habit of imitating without ſelecting, and of labouring without any determinate object; as it requires no effort of the mind, he ſleeps over his work; and thoſe powers of invention and compoſition which ought particularly to be called out, and put in action, lie torpid, and loſe their energy for want of exercife.

It is an obſervation that all muſt have made, how incapable thoſe are of producing any thing of their own, who have ſpent much of their time in making finiſhed copies.

To ſuppoſe that the complication of powers, and variety of ideas neceſſary to that mind which aſpires to the firſt honours in the Art of Painting, can be obtained by the frigid contemplation of a few ſingle models, is no leſs abſurd than it would be in him who wiſhes to be a Poet,

to imagine that by tranſlating a Tragedy he can acquire to himſelf ſufficient knowledge of the appearances of Nature, the operations of the paſſions, and the incidents of life.

The great uſe in copying, if it be at all uſeful, ſhould ſeem to be in learning to colour; yet even colouring will never be perfectly attained by ſervilely copying the model before you. An eye critically nice can only be formed by obſerving well-coloured pictures with attention: and by cloſe inſpection, and minute examination, you will diſcover, at laſt, the manner of handling, the artifices of contraſt, glazing, and other expedients, by which good colouriſts have raiſed the value of their tints, and by which Nature has been ſo happily imitated.

I muſt inform you, however, that old Pictures deſervedly celebrated for their colouring, are often ſo changed by dirt and varniſh, that we ought not to wonder if they do not appear equal to their reputation in the eyes of unexperienced Painters, or young Students. An Artiſt whoſe judgment is matured by long obſervation, conſiders rather what the Picture once was, than what it is at preſent. He has acquired a power by habit of ſeeing the brilliancy of tints through the cloud by which it is obſcured. An exact imitation,

imitation, therefore, of thoſe Pictures, is likely to fill the Student's mind with falſe opinions; and to ſend him back a colouriſt of his own formation, with ideas equally remote from Nature and from Art, from the genuine rules of the maſters, and the real appearances of things.

Following theſe rules, and uſing theſe precautions, when you have clearly and diſtinctly learned in what good colouring conſiſts, you cannot do better than have recourſe to Nature herſelf, who is always at hand, and in compariſon of whoſe rules the beſt coloured Pictures are but faint and feeble.

However, as this method is not entirely to be excluded, ſince the mechanical practice of Painting is learned in ſome meaſure by it, let thoſe choice parts only be ſelected which have recommended the work to notice. If its excellence conſiſts in its general effect, it would be proper to make ſlight ſketches of the machinery and general management of the Picture. Thoſe ſketches ſhould be kept always by you for the regulation of your ſtile. Inſtead of copying the touches of thoſe great maſters, copy only their conceptions. Inſtead of treading in their footſteps, endeavour only to keep the ſame road. Labour to invent on their

general principles and way of thinking. Poſſeſs yourſelf with their ſpirit. Conſider with yourſelf how a MICHAEL ANGELO or a RAFFAELLE would have treated this ſubject: and work yourſelf into a belief that your Picture is to be ſeen and criticiſed by them when compleated. Even an attempt of this kind will rouſe your Powers.

But as mere enthuſiaſm will carry you but a little way, let me recommend a practice that may be equivalent, and will perhaps more efficaciouſly contribute to your advancement, than even the verbal corrections of thoſe maſters themſelves, could they be obtained. What I would propoſe is, that you ſhould enter into a kind of competition, by painting a ſimilar ſubject, and making a companion to any Picture that you conſider as a model. After you have finiſhed your work, place it near the model, and compare them carefully together. You will then not only ſee, but feel your own deficiencies more ſenſibly than by precepts, or any other means of inſtruction. The true principles of Painting will mingle with your thoughts; and the example before you will ſhew you how much Art is to be employed in attaining the ſeemingly obvious ſimplicity of Nature.

Ideas thus fixed by ſenſible objects, will be certain and definitive; and ſinking deep into the mind, will not only be more juſt, but more laſting than thoſe preſented to you by precepts only; which will always be fleeting, variable, and undetermined.

This method of comparing your own efforts with thoſe of ſome great maſter, is indeed a ſevere and mortifying taſk, to which none will ſubmit, but ſuch as have great views, with fortitude ſufficient to forego the gratifications of preſent vanity for a diſtant good. When the Student has ſucceeded in ſome meaſure to his own ſatisfaction, and has felicitated himſelf on his ſucceſs, to go voluntarily to a tribunal where he knows his vanity muſt be humbled, and all ſelf-approbation muſt vaniſh, requires not only great reſolution, but great humility. To him, however, who has the ambition to be a real maſter, the ſolid ſatisfaction which proceeds from a conſciouſneſs of his advancement, (of which ſeeing his own faults is the firſt ſtep) will very abundantly compenſate for the mortification of preſent diſappointment. There is, beſide, this alleviating circumſtance; every diſcovery he makes, every acquiſition of knowledge he attains, ſeems to proceed from his own

 ſagacity;

ſagacity; and thus he acquires a confidence in himſelf ſufficient to keep up the ardour of perſeverance.

We all muſt have experienced how lazily, and conſequently how ineffectually, inſtruction is received when forced upon the mind by others. Few have been taught to any purpoſe who have not been their own teachers. We prefer thoſe inſtructions which we have given ourſelves, from our affection to the inſtructor; and they are more effectual, from being received into the mind at the very time when it is moſt open and eager to receive them.

With reſpect to the Pictures that you are to chuſe for your models, I could wiſh that you would take the world's opinion rather than your own: in other words, I would have you chuſe thoſe of eſtabliſhed reputation, rather than follow your own fancy. If you ſhould not admire them at firſt, you will, by endeavouring to imitate them, find that the world has not been miſtaken.

It is not an eaſy taſk to point out thoſe various excellencies for your imitation which lye diſtributed amongſt the various ſchools. An endeavour to do this may perhaps be

be the ſubject of ſome future diſcourſe. I will, therefore, at preſent only recommend a model for Stile in Painting, which is a branch of the Art more immediately neceſſary to the young Student. Stile in Painting is the ſame as in Writing, a power over materials, whether words or colours, by which conceptions or ſentiments are conveyed. And in this LODOVICO CARRACHE appears to me to approach the neareſt to perfection. His unaffected breadth of light and ſhadow, the ſimplicity of colouring which holding its proper rank does not draw aſide the leaſt part of the attention from the ſubject, and the ſolemn effect of that twilight which ſeems to enlighten his Pictures, appear to me to correſpond with grave and dignified ſubjects, better than the more artificial brilliancy of ſunſhine which is diffuſed over the Pictures of TITIAN. Though TINTORET thought that TITIAN's colouring was the model of perfection, and would correſpond even with the ſublime of MICHAEL ANGELO; and that if ANGELO had coloured like TITIAN, or TITIAN deſigned like ANGELO, the world would once have had a perfect Painter.

It is our misfortune, however, that thoſe works of CARRACHE which I would recommend to the Student, are not often found out of *Bologna*. The *St. Francis in the midſt*

*midſt of his Friars*, *The Transfiguration*, *The Birth of St. John the Baptiſt*, *The Calling of St. Matthew*, *The St. Jerom*, *The Freſco Paintings in the Zampieri Palace*, are all worthy the attention of the Student. And I think thoſe who travel would do well to allot a much greater portion of their time to that city than it has been hitherto the cuſtom to beſtow.

In this Art, as in others, there are many Teachers who profeſs to ſhew the neareſt way to excellence: and many expedients have been invented by which the toil of ſtudy might be ſaved. But let no man be ſeduced to idleneſs by empty promiſes. Excellence is never granted to man, but as the reward of labour. It argues indeed no ſmall ſtrength of mind to perſevere in habits of induſtry, without the pleaſure of perceiving thoſe advances; which, like the hand of a clock, whilſt they make hourly approaches to perfection, yet proceed ſo ſlowly as to eſcape obſervation. A facility of drawing, like that of playing upon a muſical inſtrument, cannot be acquired but by an infinite number of acts. I need not, therefore, inforce by many words the neceſſity of continual application; nor tell you that the porte crayon ought to be for ever in your hands. Various methods will occur to you by which this power may be acquired.

quired. I would particularly recommend, that after your return from the Academy (where I ſuppoſe your attendance to be conſtant) you would endeavour to draw the figure by memory. I will even venture to add, that by perſeverance in this cuſtom, you will become able to draw the human figure tolerably correct, with as little effort of the mind as to trace with a pen the letters of the alphabet.

That this facility is not unattainable, ſome members in this Academy give a ſufficient proof. And be aſſured, that if this power is not acquired whilſt you are young, there will be no time for it afterwards: at leaſt the attempt will be attended with as much difficulty as thoſe experience who learn to read or write after they have arrived to the age of maturity.

But while I mention the porte-crayon as the Student's conſtant companion, he muſt ſtill remember, that the Pencil is the inſtrument by which he muſt hope to obtain eminence. The advice, therefore, that I wiſh to impreſs upon you is, that whenever an opportunity offers, you paint your ſtudies inſtead of drawing them. This will give you ſuch a facility in uſing colours, that in time they will

arrange themſelves under the Pencil, even without the attention of the hand that conducts it. If one act excluded the other, this advice could not with any propriety be given. But if Painting compriſes both drawing and colouring, and if by a ſhort ſtruggle of reſolute induſtry, the ſame expedition is attainable in Painting as in drawing on paper, I cannot ſee what objection can juſtly be made to the practice; or why that ſhould be done by parts, which may be done all together.

If we turn our eyes to the ſeveral Schools of Painting, and conſider their reſpective excellencies, we ſhall find that thoſe who excel moſt in colouring, purſued this method. The *Venetian* and *Flemiſh* ſchools, which owe much of their fame to colouring, have enriched the cabinets of the collectors of drawings, with very few examples. Thoſe of TITIAN, PAUL VERONESE, TINTORET, and the BASSANS, are in general ſlight and undetermined. Their ſketches on paper are as rude as their Pictures are excellent in regard to harmony of colouring. CORREGGIO and BAROCCI have left few, if any finiſhed drawings behind them. And in the *Flemiſh* ſchool, RUBENS and VANDYKE made their deſigns for the moſt part either in colours, or in chiaro oſcuro.

oſcuro. It is as common to find ſtudies of the *Venetian* and *Flemiſh* Painters on canvaſs, as of the Schools of *Rome* and *Florence* on paper. Not but that many finiſhed drawings are ſold under the names of thoſe maſters. Thoſe, however, are undoubtedly the productions either of engravers or of their ſcholars, who copied their works.

Theſe inſtructions I have ventured to offer from my own experience; but as they deviate widely from received opinions, I offer them with diffidence; and when better are ſuggeſted, ſhall retract them without regret.

There is one precept, however, in which I ſhall only be oppoſed by the vain, the ignorant, and the idle. I am not afraid that I ſhall repeat it too often. You muſt have no dependence on your own genius. If you have great talents, induſtry will improve them: if you have but moderate abilities, induſtry will ſupply their deficiency. Nothing is denied to well directed labour: nothing is to be obtained without it. Not to enter into metaphyſical diſcuſſions on the nature or eſſence of genius, I will venture to aſſert, that aſſiduity unabated by difficulty, and a diſpoſition eagerly directed to the object of its purſuit, will produce

effects

effects ſimilar to thoſe which ſome call the reſult of *natural powers*.

Though a man cannot at all times, and in all places, paint or draw, yet the mind can prepare itſelf by laying in proper materials, at all times, and in all places. Both LIVY and PLUTARCH, in deſcribing PHILOPOEMEN, one of the ableſt generals of antiquity, have given us a ſtriking picture of a mind always intent on its profeſſion, and by aſſiduity obtaining thoſe excellencies which ſome all their lives vainly expect from Nature. I ſhall quote the paſſage in LIVY at length, as it runs parallel with the practice I would recommend to the Painter, Sculptor, or Architect.

" PHILOPOEMEN was a man eminent for his ſagacity and experience in chooſing ground, and in leading armies; to which he formed his mind by perpetual meditation, in times of peace as well as war. When, in any occaſional journey, he came to a ſtrait difficult paſſage, if he was alone, he conſidered with himſelf, and if he was in company he aſked his friends, what it would be beſt to do if in this place they had found an enemy, either in the front, or in the rear, on the one ſide, or on the other. ' It might

happen,'

happen,' ſays he, 'that the enemy to be oppoſed might come on drawn up in regular lines, or in a tumultuous body, formed only by the nature of the place.' He then conſidered a little what ground he ſhould take; what number of ſoldiers he ſhould uſe, and what arms he ſhould give them; where he ſhould lodge his carriages, his baggage, and the defenceleſs followers of his camp; how many guards, and of what kind he ſhould ſend to defend them; and whether it would be better to preſs forward along the paſs, or recover by retreat his former ſtation: he would conſider likewiſe where his camp could moſt commodiouſly be formed; how much ground he ſhould incloſe within his trenches; where he ſhould have the convenience of water; and where he might find plenty of wood and forage; and when he ſhould break up his camp on the following day, through what road he could moſt ſafely paſs, and in what form he ſhould diſpoſe his troops. With ſuch thoughts and diſquiſitions he had from his early years ſo exerciſed his mind, that on theſe occaſions nothing could happen which he had not been already accuſtomed to conſider.

I cannot help imagining that I ſee a promiſing young Painter, equally vigilant, whether at home, or abroad in

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the ſtreets, or in the fields. Every object that preſents itſelf, is to him a leſſon. He regards all Nature with a view to his profeſſion; and combines her beauties, or corrects her defects. He examines the countenance of men under the influence of paſſion; and often catches the moſt pleaſing hints from ſubjects of turbulence or deformity. Even bad Pictures themſelves ſupply him with uſeful documents; and, as LEONARDO DA VINCI has obſerved, improves upon the fanciful images that are ſometimes ſeen in the fire, or are accidentally ſketched upon a diſcoloured wall.

The Artiſt who has his mind thus filled with ideas, and his hand made expert by practice, works with eaſe and readineſs; whilſt he who would have you believe that he is waiting for the inſpirations of Genius, is in reality at a loſs how to begin; and is at laſt delivered of his Monſters, with difficulty and pain.

The well-grounded Painter, on the contrary, has only maturely to conſider his ſubject, and all the mechanical parts of his Art follow without his exertion. Conſcious of the difficulty of obtaining what he poſſeſſes, he makes

no pretenſions to ſecrets, except thoſe of cloſer application. Without conceiving the ſmalleſt jealouſy againſt others, he is contented that all ſhall be as great as himſelf, who are willing to undergo the ſame fatigue: and as his pre-eminence depends not upon a trick, he is free from the painful ſuſpicions of a jugler, who lives in perpetual fear, leſt his trick ſhould be diſcovered.

F I N I S.

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